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ABSTRACT

Ethnoscience studies, and studies of color vocabulary in particular, have firmly established that to understand the full range of meaning of a word in any language, each new language must be approached on its own terms, without a priori theories of semantic universals. It has been shown that color words in fact encode a great deal of non-colorimetric information. The essentially methodological point made in such studies has been frequently misinterpreted by anthropologists and linguists as an argument against the existence of semantic universals. The research reported here strongly indicates that semantic universals do exist in the domain of color vocabulary. Moreover, these universals appear to be related to the historical development of all languages in a way that can be properly termed evolutionary. Conclusions are threefold: (1) there exist universally for humans eleven basic perceptual color categories, which serve as psychophysical referents of the eleven or fewer basic color terms in any language; (2) in the history of any given language, encoding of perceptual categories into basic color terms follows a fixed partial order; and (3) the overall temporal order is properly considered an evolutionary one (color lexicons with few terms tend to occur in association with relatively simple cultures and simple technologies, while color lexicons with many terms tend to occur in association with complex cultures and complex technologies). Extensive tables, data, and figures appear throughout the text. (KFT)

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